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Abstract

The disqualification of Aeschylus's *Suppliants* as our earliest surviving tragedy has inevitably led to new understandings of the play's prominent chorus. While the use of the chorus as a main character was once seen as a direct link with tragedy's past and a conservative reflection of tragedy's origins, that feature is now as likely to be viewed as an innovation. Thus H. Friis Johansen and E. H. Whittle, authors of the extensive 1980 commentary on the play, see the *Suppliants* as a "grandiose experiment with a group instead of a single person as the main carrier of the action." In their view this experiment stands outside the history of tragedy, telling us nothing about the evolution of the genre; it does not derive from the tragedies that immediately preceded the *Suppliants*, and it exerted "no influence on the development of Attic tragedy."

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WOMEN IN GROUPS: AESCHYLUS'S *SUPPLIANTS* AND THE
FEMALE CHORUSES OF GREEK TRAGEDY


Sheila Murnaghan

The disqualification of Aeschylus's *Suppliants* as our earliest surviving tragedy has inevitably led to new understandings of the play's prominent chorus.¹ While the use of the chorus as a main character was once seen as a direct link with tragedy's past and a conservative reflection of tragedy's origins, that feature is now as likely to be viewed as an innovation. Thus H. Friis Johansen and E. H. Whittle, authors of the extensive 1980 commentary on the play, see the *Suppliants* as a "grandiose experiment with a group instead of a single person as the main carrier of the action." In their view this experiment stands outside the history of tragedy, telling us nothing about the evolution of the genre; it does not derive from the tragedies that immediately preceded the *Suppliants*, and it exerted "no influence on the development of Attic tragedy."²

Readings like this rightly reveal the *Suppliants* as a witness to Aeschylus's inventiveness and versatility as a playwright. But they may also go too far in robbing the play of its value as evidence for tragedy's relationship to its choral roots and ongoing affinities to other forms of choral poetry. We will never be able to construct a reliable narrative of the origins of tragedy out of our available evidence, and attempts to approximate one by sorting chronologically our meager store of extant plays (all relatively late in the history of the genre) and connecting the dots are bound to be reductive. But there is no denying that the chorus remains a vital feature of tragedy throughout its history, despite some decrease in its prominence over time. Moreover, Aristotle, source of the best information we have about tragedy's development, tied the appearance of the genre to a reconfiguration of the chorus through the creation of new rela-

tionships between the chorus and its leaders. If we allow that the prominence of the *Suppliants'* chorus may not be wholly an invention of Aeschylus, we can use the play to understand better the connections to nondramatic choral poetry which remain a defining feature of tragedy throughout its history, even as we refrain from placing it first in a scheme of linear development. The unusually central chorus of the *Suppliants* may retain links to earlier phases of tragedy, even if it is not a step in an orderly progression, and may hold clues to the underlying concerns and functions of the more marginal choruses we encounter in other plays, as well as to their relationships with those plays' more dominant protagonists.

The *Suppliants'* chorus of Danaids directs our attention to particular strands in the multiple mythological and poetic traditions that form the background of tragedy.³ As a group of women, the Danaids are in one sense unrepresentative of the tragic chorus, which was itself composed of men, and which Aristotle saw as evolving from the dithyrambic chorus, which was also usually male.⁴ But in their femaleness, the Danaids are typical of the fictional roles of tragic choruses that, in our extant plays, represent groups of women almost twice as often as groups of men,⁵ and they reflect more generally the strong interest in female experience and female subjectivity that tragedy exhibits, despite being an art form performed exclusively by and primarily for men. Understood as representative tragic figures, rather than as an anomalous experiment, the chorus of the *Suppliants* highlight the relevance to tragedy of other contexts in which groups of women are also protagonists: those chorocentric poems performed by actual choruses of young women, and myths in which groups of young women or female choruses figure as characters in the plot. In both of those contexts, female choruses outnumber male choruses, as in the fictional circumstances of tragedy (Calame 1997, 25). If the female chorus does not represent tragedy's literal origins, it does play a disproportionate role in defining the experience that tragedy draws on and seeks, in some measure, to depict.

As Claude Calame demonstrates in his important study, *Choruses of Young Women in Archaic Greece*, one of the most common contexts for the ancient Greek female chorus was that of initiation, specifically the initiation of young women into adult life, which was defined for women by marriage. Groups of young women, all contemporaries, sang and danced together to establish their readiness for marriage. Their performance marked a moment of transition, or liminal phase, in which they had left childhood behind and had not yet embarked on their new, individual lives as wives and mothers. The dramatic situation of the Danaids clearly reflects, in the heightened idiom of a mythological plot, this initiatory scenario.⁶ As a group of sisters, with a strong sense of con-

nection both to Egypt and to Argos, they display the contemporaneousness, the close bonds, and the geographical unity typical of the female chorus (Calame 1997, 26–33). In their status as wanderers, they reflect the transitional nature of their stage of life. Moreover they manifest their particular status by their active attachment to what is normally understood as a temporary phase. In their adamant rejection of their Egyptian suitors, they fight to remain frozen in that fleeting stage of life that choral performances by young women would briefly capture. While their personal resistance to these marriages is staunch, their age-based eligibility for marriage is not in doubt. At the end of the play, their father Danaus voices the fear that they will undergo the natural consequence of their *hōra* (time of life): they will catch the eyes of suitors and be drawn into unions with men through the power of that visual connection (*Supp.* 996–97).

If actual choral performances, like the plot of the *Suppliants*, stress the moment when young women have not yet arrived at heterosexual union and marriage, myths that involve female choruses tend to focus on that inevitable sequel. In mythology choruses and chorus-like groups of young women show up as the companions of particular heroines, who stand out in their midst and who are often removed from the chorus by male figures whose eye they catch. In these mythological situations, the heroine's departure from the chorus often takes the form of abduction, and the abductor is often a god: the female chorus is a regular accessory to the widespread plot of the mortal woman who is united with a god.⁷ But a young woman's visibility in the dance is also the prelude to a more conventional marriage to a mortal man, and mythological scenarios combine these two possibilities in a variety of ways. A relatively simple example is the story of Polymele, which is told in the catalogue of the Myrmidons in Book 16 of the *Iliad*:

The next battalion was led by warlike Eudoros, a maiden's child, born to one lovely in the dance, Polymele, daughter of Phylas; whom strong Hermes Argeiphontes loved, when he watched her with his eyes among the girls dancing in the choir for clamorous Artemis of the golden distaff. Presently Hermes the healer went up with her into her chamber and lay secretly with her, and she bore him a son, the shining Eudoros, a surpassing runner and a quick man in battle. But after Eileithyia of the hard pains had brought out the child into the light, and he looked on the sun's shining, Aktor's son Echekles in the majesty of his great power led her to his house, when he had given numberless gifts to win her,

and the old man Phylas took the child and brought him up kindly
and cared for him, with affection as if he had been his own son.

(Il. 16.179–92)⁸

In this brief rehearsal of Polymele's story, the divine lover and the mortal husband are combined in a straightforward way. One follows the other in a comfortable sequence, and the god's child is conveniently raised by his maternal grandfather. In other myths this possible doubling of a woman's mates takes different forms. In the story of Creusa, as dramatized in Euripides' *Ion*, the combination of rape by Apollo and marriage to the mortal Xuthus produces complication and suffering, and only after a long stretch of time can Creusa's dual unions be brought into harmony and her semi-divine son be adopted into his maternal line. In the case of Alcmene, Zeus, her divine lover, comes to her disguised as her mortal husband, Amphitryon. In the make-believe scenario concocted by Aphrodite to seduce Anchises in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, Aphrodite, ostensibly a mortal, is abducted from the dance by Hermes, but instead of having sex with her himself he brings her to the mortal Anchises for an encounter that is conditioned by the expectation of marriage. In the case of Persephone, abducted while playing with the Oceanids, she is united only with a god, Hades, but this union to a god who symbolizes mortality clearly figures the mortal marriage that other stories separate out and present as a sequel to mating with a god.⁹ In the meeting of Odysseus and Nausicaa in *Odyssey* 6, nothing actually happens, but both scenarios are evoked through comparisons. Nausicaa playing with her friends is compared to Artemis standing out among her companions (101–9), and Nausicaa envisions Odysseus both as a god and as her legitimate mortal husband (239–46).

In mythology, then, the female chorus participates in a dynamic scenario, in which one member of the group is separated out and embarks on an often-complicated course toward the settled state of marriage. These myths dramatize the inherent instability of the chorus of young women, which comes into being for the sake of being dissolved as each of its members moves on to her destined role of wife (Goff 2004, 89–91). Some ancient accounts of youthful choruses imagine a wholesale fragmentation, as groups of young men and women simultaneously form a series of pairs. Thus, in the *Laws* Plato has the Athenian prescribe mixed choruses as a means of generalized matchmaking: "In anticipation of the partnership and intercourse of marriage it is necessary to remove ignorance about which woman a man marries . . . and to whom a man gives his daughter. . . . In view of achieving this serious purpose boys and girls must be made to dance together at an age when suitable pretexts can be

found for their doing so, and they should be made to view one another and to be viewed" (*Leg.* 771E1–72A4; trans. Lonsdale 1993).

In the case of the all-female chorus, the stress may be on the separation of a single individual from the group, which may present itself as bereft. In Alcman's first *Partheneion*, the chorus suggestively describe themselves as having been eleven in number, but now only ten (*PLG* 1.98–99). We do not know enough to specify the context of that song with confidence, but one—inevitably speculative—interpretation takes those lines as evidence that the song was occasioned by the marriage of one member of the group (Griffiths 1972, 2). Other interpretations stress the readiness for marriage of either or both of the two figures singled out for praise, Hagesichora and Agido, suggesting that they will soon leave the others behind.¹⁰ In the poetry of Sappho, which evokes a similar collectivity of young women, the departure of a single outstanding individual is foregrounded several times as an occasion of pain and regret (frags. 94, 96).

Aeschylus's Danaids take their stand in opposition to this momentum, refusing with one voice any advance toward marriage and with it toward the reconfiguration of their group. Their resistance to a marriage plot is accompanied by a prominent and unusual relationship to one element in such a plot: the sexual union of a mortal woman with a god, a union that often, as we have seen, coexists with her marriage to a mortal man. The chorus of the *Suppliants* is focused on one of the most famous of such stories, the story of Io. They exhibit a strong identification with Io, whose story offers a kind of paradigm for their own struggles with their virgin status.¹¹ But Io is not one of them; rather she is their ancestress and the primary subject of their singing. Instead of leaving them behind, she is memorialized as a permanent model, and patroness of them all, in whose footsteps they follow (*Supp.* 538, 1017). Io's story, moreover, has certain characteristics and receives certain emphases that invert the usual significance of such myths. Io is unusual among mortal women who are seduced by gods in that she is not also associated with marriage to a mortal man, and the Danaids tell the story of her union with Zeus in such a way as to deny its sexual element.¹² Thus they manage to make of Zeus's encounter with Io in Egypt a form of liberation that can be invoked as a model for the liberation from marriage which they desire. In one particularly striking passage, they enjoin Zeus: φιλίας προγόνου γυναικός / νέωσον εὔφρον' αἴνον (Renew the fortunate tale of our ancestress whom you loved, *Supp.* 533–34).

The Danaids succeed in achieving the steady state they desire within the plot of the *Suppliants*, convincing the Argives to defend their right to stay as they are. But in the context of ancient Greek culture it is impossible for have young women to remain unmarried, and this kind of female chorus is not

constituted on a permanent basis. By the end of the *Suppliants*, we see increasing hints that marriages of some sort lie in the future for these women.¹³ The Danaids' voice is complemented by that of a new secondary chorus—possibly of handmaidens, possibly of young Argive men—which sings of the power of Aphrodite and evokes marriage as the time-honored *teleuta* (outcome) for women (*Supp.* 1034–51). In assuring their father that he need not be troubled by their *opōra* (ripeness) because they will not depart from their chosen path, the chorus itself does add the qualification, εἰ γὰρ τι μὴ θεοῖς βεβούλεται νέον (unless the gods are planning something new, *Supp.* 1016). And of course the chorus contains within it, unacknowledged but known to the audience, the figure of Hypermestra.

As the plot moves on to the inevitable sequel of marriage for the Danaids, initially in the form of marriage to the hated Aegyptioi, the Danaids convert their opposition into action by murdering their husbands. But Hypermestra chooses to separate herself from her sisters and, by sparing her husband's life, willingly chooses marriage. In so doing, Hypermestra alone completes the pattern supplied by Io; she performs the acceptance of motherhood that her sisters fail to see as part of Io's story (Murray 1958, 59–76).

In her distinction from her sisters, Hypermestra becomes a version of the *chorēgos*.¹⁴ Exactly how these elements of the myth were presented by Aeschylus remains a matter of speculation,¹⁵ but it is possible that Hypermestra appeared as protagonist in the final play of the trilogy, the *Danaids*.¹⁶ If her sisters formed the play's chorus, as the play's title suggests, they appeared as a chorus of a more familiar kind. Like other tragic choruses, they were not themselves a protagonist and, like nontragic female choruses, they represented a group from whose number an especially prominent woman was departing or about to depart for the sake of marrying. It is quite possible that, as in those nontragic scenarios, the dissolution of the whole group was also implicit, since new marriages for the entire group may have been envisioned or even arranged. This outcome to the Danaid myth is recounted in Pindar's *Pythian* 9, dated to 474, shortly before the *Suppliants*. There Danaus arranges in Argos a footrace to find husbands for his forty-eight unmarried daughters. As Pindar puts it, Danaus stationed *hapanta choron* (the entire chorus) at the finish line (*Pyth.* 9.114). The competition to determine the Danaids' second husbands is also mentioned briefly by Apollodorus. More interesting, Apollodorus identifies each of the Danaids by name as he recounts their first marriages, to the Aegyptioi, whom he also names. In effect Apollodorus breaks both groups down into a series of named pairs. At the head of the list is Hypermestra, chosen first because she is the eldest, and bestowed on Lynceus because he is the son of a highborn mother (2.1.5).

The satyr play that accompanied the Danaid trilogy may have reinforced this reemergence of a more familiar choral scenario. That play concerned Amymone, the second of the Danaids to be removed from the group (thereby yielding Pindar's remainder of forty-eight). Sent to look for water, Amymone was discovered at a well by a satyr, who attempted to rape her. She was rescued by Poseidon, who scared off the satyr and mated with her himself, thereby fathering the hero Nauplius. Balancing Hypermestra's experience of a mortal marriage, Amymone's story would have brought the other element of the typical maiden's story—union with a god—into the complete tetralogy. As in the version of the Io story that the Danaids promote, that union with a god would have been presented as a form of rescue. At the same time, the unforced union of Amymone with Poseidon may have echoed the unforced union of Hypermestra and Lyceus.¹⁷

This scenario of a character separating himself or herself out of the chorus to take on an individual role is not only the plot of the Danaid trilogy; it is also the plot of the origin of tragedy, at least as Aristotle tells it. According to Aristotle, tragedy was generated from the leaders of the dithyramb (τῶν ἐξάρχοντων τὸν διθύραμβον, *Poet.* 4.1449a11), and the origin of the tragic actor is to be traced to those figures, known as *exarchontes* or *chorēgoi*, who stand out from other members of the chorus and assume an unusually prominent role. It is not clear whether Aristotle's statement is based on any actual knowledge.¹⁸ Furthermore the characters of tragedy, in their distinction from the choruses, clearly owe a great deal to the nonchoral traditions of epic, elegy, and iambus, most obviously in their dialect and meters (Herington 1985, 117–22). But whether Aristotle's claim is fact or suggestive speculation, it invites us to consider that the relationships between lyric choruses and their leaders may underlie the relationships between tragic choruses and tragic characters. We now label those lyric choruses with the retronym "nondramatic," but their performances had an appreciably dramatic aspect,¹⁹ which may well have influenced the tragic plot and its mode of presentation.

Chorus leaders came in many forms and took on many different relationships with individual choruses. But the type of *chorēgos* represented by the especially distinguished woman, the one who is most conspicuous and destined for marriage, has a particular relevance to tragedy because her trajectory within the scenario of the choral performance may reflect the historical development that produced the genre. Even if Aristotle is right, the emergence of the conspicuous woman cannot be seen as literally the origin of tragedy, since his scenario of the differentiation of leaders from the chorus specifies the largely male genre of the dithyramb. But it is a phenomenon that echoes that origin and, at the same time, constitutes one of the fundamental forms of

action found in tragedy, where a woman's emergence into public view often motivates the plot. I have argued elsewhere that this echo of tragedy's genesis can be detected in the figure of Agave in Euripides' *Bacchae*, who is presented as distinguishing herself from the chorus-like collective of her sisters, the daughters of Cadmus.²⁰ Here I suggest that the Danaid trilogy provides another such echo: within the trilogy, the conversion of an individual chorus member into a protagonist apparently accompanies a formal shift through which the final play takes on the more developed form of a drama in which the chorus is no longer the main character.

The especially prominent chorus member is only one of a number of types of *chorēgos* associated with choral performance. The chorus generated several forms of leader, and the role of *chorēgos* evolved over time in a number of directions, including the eventual emergence of the *chorēgos* as the one who financed the performance rather than someone who participated in it.²¹ In addition to prominent members of the group, female choruses were associated with *chorēgoi* who were different from them in being both male and older. This form of *chorēgos* could be associated, as apparently in the case of Alcman, with the poet, who not only provided the chorus with their words but instructed them in their dancing. The Danaid chorus of the *Suppliants* are closely associated with such a figure, in the person of their father Danaus. Not only is the father a central character in any marriage plot, but it is through their fathers that the choruses of mythology are constituted and identified. Mythical choruses are frequently, like the Danaids, groups of sisters, and they are often known through their patronyms. Thus we get the Oceanids, daughters of Oceanus; the Nereids, daughters of Nereus; and the Proetids, daughters of Proetus. The paradigmatic female chorus of mythology is formed by the Muses, who are regularly identified as the daughters of Zeus, and who are perennially devoted to their father. As Hesiod tells us (*Theog.* 47–49), they constantly sing the praises of Zeus.

In the *Suppliants* the Danaids are closely connected to their father, both thematically and formally. He and they are united in opposition to their proposed marriages to the Aegyptioi.²² In one version of the myth, Danaus is, in fact, the source and prospective beneficiary of that opposition; he prohibits his daughters' marriages because he knows of a prophecy that he will be killed by a son-in-law. A number of scholars have argued that this version of the myth was followed by Aeschylus and was treated in the *Aegyptioi*, which may have formed the first play of the trilogy.²³ In any case Danaus and his daughters remain close, not only in their sentiments, but in their dramatic functions. His part in the action is both similar and subordinate to that of the chorus, to the point that A. F. Garvie, in his study of the play, is prompted to ask, "Why then

is Danaus there at all, when for most of the play he appears to be dramatically superfluous?" (Garvie 1969, 135).

Garvie's conclusion is that Danaus is there to fulfill typical functions of the chorus, especially the provision of detached reflection, which have been lost through the experiment of making the chorus the main character.²⁴ But it might make more sense to see Danaus, with his close tie to the chorus, not as a compensatory figure necessitated by this chorus's aberrant prominence, but as a reflection of the *chorēgoi* who may lie behind all tragic actors. This was, in fact, the view of a number of scholars when the *Suppliants* was still thought to be our earliest tragedy,²⁵ and it does have considerable textual support. The Danaids refer to Danaus in terms that strongly suggest a chorus leader, calling him their *boularchos* (*Supp.* 11, 970) and their *stasiarchos* (*Supp.* 12) and, like a *chorēgos*, he is their director. As they await the appearance of the Argive king, he gives them detailed instructions about how to perform in his presence, specifying their gestures (their suppliant wreaths must be in the left hand), their use of their eyes (their gaze must be modest), and the manner of their speech (neither too hesitant nor too ready) (*Supp.* 191–203). They in turn call on Zeus to assure that they will remember their father's behests (*Supp.* 205–6).

Nondramatic choral lyric does offer a possible example of a chorus in which both a father and his daughter are present as leaders. In Pindar's second *Partheneion*, the chorus evidently calls on the "father of Damaina" to lead them and then adds that the first to follow will be the daughter (66–68).²⁶ The choral focus of the *Suppliants* may allow us to glimpse the closer relationships, originating in near identification, between chorus and characters, out of which the relatively distanced connections of most extant tragedy developed. If, as many have proposed, the final play in the Danaid trilogy depicted Danaus bringing Hypermetra to trial for her decision to save her husband,²⁷ we would then have a tragic *agōn* generated out of the conflict between two leaders of the same chorus. The conflict between father and daughter, which inevitably figures in tragic explorations of marriage, might then also reiterate potential tensions in the constitution of the lyric chorus.

In characterizing the choral protagonist of the *Suppliants* as an unusual experiment, Alan Sommerstein presents choral action as antithetical to tragedy:

There is a very good reason why this was not normally done. Tragedy was about the doings and sufferings of men and women who were out of the normal run, of exceptional people; and exceptional people normally come as individuals, not as groups of twelve or fifteen indistinguishable people. . . . The Danaids were a very special case: a large group of persons whose actions, culminating in the killing of their husbands, were eminently suited for tragedy,

but who could appear in tragedy only as a chorus, since the only individuals among them who had distinct personalities, Hypermestra and Amymone, were untypical of the group and could not act as its representatives. (1996, 153)

There is no question that tragedy became an art form focused on the vicissitudes of exceptional individuals. And yet the chorus never disappeared from tragedy; those individuals were always presented in association with a chorus, and recent scholarship has highlighted the centrality of choral performance to tragedy's role in Athenian life.²⁸ The chorus of the *Suppliants* can help us give due weight to tragedy's ongoing choral nature by reminding us that the chorus provides the necessary context in which individuals can be defined as exceptional.²⁹ The Danaids' circumstances, and those of their analogues in both myth and nondramatic poetry, provide a setting in which exceptional individuals become distinguished from the group and are marked as exceptional, but such distinction is only temporary, and the chorus itself is unstable. For a chorus constituted of unmarried women, the ultimate trajectory must be one in which each of those women becomes the exceptional one and leaves the chorus: each must be singled out for her own fated marriage. Thus what we know of the Danaid legend suggests that a future must be envisioned in which the Danaid chorus has been dissolved. The unrepresentative quality of Hypermestra, to which Sommerstein points, is a temporary phenomenon: it has not yet been realized at the point dramatized by the *Suppliants*, and it has disappeared again by the time the story ends, either within the trilogy or in the future foreseen there, with the marriages of all the sisters.

In developed tragedy as we mostly know it, the chorus has stabilized, and the kind of dynamism associated with the Danaids is reserved for the main characters. This clearer distinction in role between chorus and characters is reinforced by sharper social distinctions. Tragic choruses are frequently, even typically, assigned socially marginal roles as women, slaves, or old men.³⁰ In mythic and nondramatic choruses, the relationship between chorus and chorus leader involves elements of both equality and hierarchy. Typically, "the leader is set apart by her higher social position" (Calame 1997, 72). At the same time, there is a stress on the similarity of the chorus members because of their shared age and location and, in those mythic examples in which the chorus members are sisters, their shared paternity. As it evolved out of such choruses and fictionalized their circumstances, tragedy chose to emphasize and exaggerate the element of hierarchy. Many tragic choruses both occupy a markedly lower social position than that of the main characters and actively embrace that position, praying for a life that is modest and unremarkable. But we can still detect,

in the roles of extant choruses, traces of a more equal connection to the protagonists. Euripides' *Ion* provides one example: Creusa is supported by a group of slave women, who identify closely with her, intervene in the action on her behalf, and help assure the narration of her rape by Apollo. In their close relationship to Creusa, this chorus of women substitute for two groups of women of the same status as Creusa: her own sisters, the Erechtheids, all of whom died when she was a baby, and the earlier Aglaurids, who are evoked as perennially dancing on a grassy meadow near the cave where Creusa was raped.

Another example in which the chorus has similar emotional ties with a woman who mates with a god is provided by the *Prometheus Bound*, a play, whether by Aeschylus or not, which has marked thematic connections to the *Suppliants*. There the chorus represent a group of sisters, the Oceanids, whose main role in the plot is to provide a sympathetic audience for the main characters, Prometheus and Io. Their interest in Io links them, of course, to the more prominent Danaid chorus of the *Suppliants*, and they further resemble that chorus in being sisters and in having their father appear along with them as a character in the play. Like the Danaids, they are actually related to Io, as the sisters of her father (PV 636), but that relationship does not form the basis of any action; rather they confine themselves to assuring that Io's story is told. In particular they assure that her past sufferings are fully rehearsed, intervening to defer Prometheus's account of her future so they can have the "share of pleasure" (*moiran d' hēdonēs*) that comes with questioning her about her sickness and her misfortunes (PV 631–34).

The task of bringing Io's story to light is also assumed by the Danaid chorus. In their first song, they foresee themselves *νῦν ἐν ποιονόμοις / ματρὸς ἀρχαίας τόποις τῶν / πρόσθε πόνων μνασαμένα* (in the grassy places of our ancient mother recalling her earlier troubles, *Supp.* 50–52), in order to convey the surprising news of their Argive descent. Thus their particular need to establish their claim on the Argives leads them to evoke Io's struggles in the same location, where, had they been her companions and she a girl, they would have been dancing with her.³¹ In the dialogue with Pelasgus to which this passage looks forward, they elicit elements of Io's story from him in a detailed interchange and explicitly underscore the accord between his account and their own (*Supp.* 310).

For the Oceanids of the *Prometheus Bound*, however, their primary function in the drama is to assure that Io's story is told; they have no further agenda of their own and no personal stake in Io's experience. In an ode that seems more appropriate to the humble mortal choruses of certain other plays than to the daughters of Oceanus, they stress their own aversion to a union with a god, or

to any unequal marriage (*PV* 887–907). In becoming the chorus of a tragedy, the Oceanids take on the lower social status that goes with that function, even though it is not theirs by birth.

The chorus of Euripides' *Phoenissae* also illustrates, whether by deliberate imitation or not, the adaptation of the Danaids' situation to a more typical marginal role.³² The chorus is composed of foreign slave women in transit from their native Phoenicia to Delphi, where they are destined to serve Apollo. Thus, like the Danaids, and like young women between girlhood and marriage, they are wanderers. While their servile status sets them apart from the protagonists, the distinction is softened by the fact that they are the select slaves of a god,³³ and just as the Danaids claim a kinship with the Argives, the Phoenissae are kin to the Thebans; furthermore their kinship derives from Io through Agenor, Io's descendant and the father of Cadmus. But as in the case of the Oceanids in the *Prometheus Bound*, their kinship is not a factor in the plot, but simply the basis of a sympathetic interest in the concerns of the Theban protagonists, especially the young unmarried woman Antigone.

This cluster of choruses related to Io represents just one of the many forms the tragic chorus could take, and I do not claim that the particular connections they manifest between tragedy and choral performances are characteristic of the entire genre. These connections represent just one strand in the network of links between tragedy and the choral traditions out of which tragedy partly emerged. Other equally important strands have to do with more explicitly Dionysian contexts and the activities of the Dionysian *thiasos*, and with contexts of male initiation and the relations between male leaders and their men in martial settings. But the patterns these choruses establish do show up in a significant number of other plays. Female choruses are often in transit, sometimes in ways that are clearly motivated by the plot, as in the *Trojan Women*, but sometimes not, as in the *Phoenissae*, where there is no clear reason why the choruses could not have been composed of native Thebans.³⁴

More generally, female choruses often figure as the supporters of women who are struggling with marriage—women who have been unable to reach the *telos* of marriage, such as Electra, Iphigenia, and Antigone, and women whose marriages have not achieved the stability and invisibility of a happy ending, such as Deianeira, Phaedra, Medea, and Helen. In eliciting and helping to make known the extraordinary stories of tragedy's protagonists, choruses take a persistent interest in the sexual encounters with gods that frequently complicate the entry of mythological heroines into womanhood.³⁵ Those concerns are not confined to female choruses; the chorus of old men in the *Agamemnon* are the eager audience of Cassandra's experience with Apollo. Another such chorus, that of old Theban men in Euripides' *Heracles*, actually

describe themselves as inspired by a chorus of young women: they sing a paean because the Delian maidens do (*HF* 687–700).

As a key social institution in which private desires and the interests of the polis intersect, marriage is inevitably one of the main subjects of tragedy.³⁶ Tragic plots are often generated out of the detours that prevent a woman's smooth transition from girlhood to marriage and motherhood. The choruses who assist at the unfolding of those plots are not just observers of the scenarios of dislocation, resistance, grief, and divine interference which make them up. Whether they appear at the center of the action like the Danaids, or whether they are displaced and disguised as insignificant bystanders as are most tragic choruses, entire groups of women are vital participants in such actions.



NOTES

My thanks to the two referees for this volume and to André Lardinois for very helpful suggestions.

1. For discussion of the papyrus that changed the dating of the play, see Garvie 1969, 1–28.
2. Friis Johansen and Whittle 1980, 1: 26. The term *experiment* is also used at Garvie 1969, 139 and Sommerstein 1996, 158. The Danaid chorus was not, in itself, an experiment, since Phrynicus had written a *Danaides*, in which the fate of the chorus was presumably at issue, even if the chorus was not a main character.
3. On tragedy's synthesis of multiple lyric genres, see Segal 1993, 15; Herington 1985, 113–17.
4. For women's rare associations with the dithyramb outside Athens, see Calame 1977, 79–80.
5. In surviving tragedy there are twenty-one female choruses and eleven male choruses. As Richard Seaford (1994, 272) notes, "It is striking that choruses often represent females even when the myth does not require a female rather than a male chorus." If lost plays are considered, the disparity may be less pronounced. See Foley 2003, 12–13, 26–27. For an analysis of the roles taken by female choruses, see Foley 2003, 14; Easterling 1988.
6. On the Danaids in the *Suppliants* as reflecting "the virginal bride in a scenario of flight and pursuit," see Zeitlin 1996, 127–36. On the Danaid myth more generally as an account of female initiation, see Dowden 1989, 147–65.
7. For examples and an analysis of the typical structure of this scenario under the label "the girl's tragedy," see Burkert 1979, 6–7; for choruses dedicated to Artemis as a particularly common setting for such stories, see Calame 1997, 91–93.
8. I use Lattimore's (1951) translation.
9. On Persephone's fate as symbolizing mortal marriage, see Foley 1994, 104–12.
10. Calame 1977, 2: 100–104; Stehle 1997, 32.
11. As Zeitlin (1996, 154) puts it, "Io's story, far better than theirs, exemplifies the precarious situation that attends the scenario of a virgin's transition into matrimony." For the persuasiveness and significance of Io as a model for the Danaids, see Murray 1958. On Io's story as a myth of female initiation, see Dowden 1989, 117–45, esp. 131–33, for a possible connection between her status as priestess and the role of chorus leader.

12. Zeitlin 1996, 151–53; Sommerstein 1996, 163–68.
13. Gödde (2000, 244) even compares the Danaids' acceptance into Argos to a bride's incorporation into her new home.
14. Dowden (1989, 162) suggests a link between Hypermetra's function as *chorēgos* and her name: "Like Amymone, she is picked out by name, a superlative name ['Super-to-woo?'] which may reflect that select leader of the initiatory chorus who becomes a priestess in historical times."
15. On the reconstruction of the trilogy, see Garvie 1969, 163–233; Friis Johansen and Whittle 1980, 1:40–55.
16. Friis Johansen and Whittle (1980, 1:52–53) conclude that she probably did, but first note as a possible counterargument that "it is without parallel in extant Greek tragedy for one member of a collective group to appear as a named and individually acting character in a play where that group forms the chorus." They see this argument as outweighed by the "experimentation with the chorus in this trilogy," but this distinctive feature can also be understood as providing a relatively rare retrospective window on the process through which tragedy was formed.
17. On the *Amymone* see Sutton 1974. Sutton details the possible connections between the plot of the *Amymone* and the events of the Danaid trilogy. He also notes the parallels between the *Amymone* and another of Aeschylus's satyr plays, the *Diktyoulokoï*. The *Diktyoulokoï* concerned Danae, another prominent heroine who mated with a god and gave birth to a hero. The plot evidently involved Silenus's attempt to rape or marry Danae, possibly followed by her rescue by Dictys and marriage to him. Danae's story would then include the full complement of divine union and human marriage, with the human marriage represented as a form of rescue.
18. See Else 1965, 14; Lucas 1968, 79–80.
19. As Herington (1985, 40) puts it, choral lyric "had a strong tendency to become a kind of drama in itself."
20. In an essay that is essentially a companion piece to this one, see Murnaghan (forthcoming).
21. On the multiple forms of the *chorēgos*, see Nagy 1990, 339–81; on the *chorēgos* as financial sponsor, see Wilson 2000.
22. The close *homophrosunē* of father and daughters is stressed by verbal echoes: *Supp.* 181, 204, 227.
23. On Aeschylus's use of the oracle, see Sicherl 1986. For the view that the *Aegyptioi* treated the oracle and came first in the trilogy, see Rösler 1993; Sommerstein 1994 and 1996, 144–47.
24. Garvie's view is echoed by Friis Johansen and Whittle 1980, 1:27.
25. See the discussion and bibliography at Garvie 1969, 127–28.
26. This is, however, uncertain as only three letters of the word *father* are present in the papyrus in which this poem is preserved.
27. Such a trial is mentioned in Pausanias 3.19.6.
28. See, e.g., Calame 1999; Goldhill 1996; Gould 1996; Wiles 1997; Wilson 2000; Winkler 1985.
29. On the chorus with its leaders as an enactment of the relationships among male citizens—at once hierarchical and egalitarian—which defined the polis, see Nagy 1990, 410–11.
30. On the marginal roles assigned to choruses, see Gould 1996. Gould's discussion shows that these marginal roles do not prevent the chorus from voicing a deep concern for the fate of the community or from recalling its collective traditions.
31. For Io's association with grassy meadows, see *Supp.* 43, 539.
32. For the parallel, see Zeitlin 1996, 165–66n.113.
33. On the high status of these women, see Mastronarde 1994, 208–9.
34. On female choruses as travelers, see Easterling 1988, 23; on the tragic space conceived more

generally as a temporary stopping place from which the chorus is in transit, see Calame 1994–95, 143–44.

35. On the frequency of this story in Attic drama, both tragic and comic, see Scafuro 1990.

36. Important studies of marriage as a tragic theme include Foley 2001, 59–105; Ormand 1999; Seaford 1987; Rehm 1994.

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REDEEMING MATRICIDE? EURIPIDES REREADS THE ORESTEIA



From I. Zeitlin

From its first production at the dramatic festival in Athens in 458 B.C.E., Aeschylus's *Oresteia* seems to have achieved canonical status, both as a masterpiece in the history of the theater and as an influential document of civic ideology.¹ Charting an evolution from savagery to civilization, from chthonic to Olympian hegemony, from the Furies' crude law of the blood vendetta to the reasoned debates of a divinely sanctioned law court, the *Oresteia* gave voice and shape to a vision of the democratic polis that could exult in its power to transform the past, reconcile divisive strife, found new institutions for the future, and assure the welfare of its citizens in a prosperous land under the name of justice.

This celebratory assessment is certainly the way the *Oresteia* used to be read. In some quarters, no doubt, it still is. But in recent years, a more critical eye has been trained on this and other significant examples of Athenian self-representation and civic myth-making—in the theater as elsewhere in other cultural productions of the period. For me, at any rate, the transforming moment arrived when I began to wonder why the victory of "civilization" was necessarily predicated on the defeat of women, and even more, why the crime of matricide and its exoneration was deemed essential to the foundation of civic order and progress. This was the question I posed in an essay published long ago, entitled "The Dynamics of Misogyny."² There I wanted, above all, to make sense of Apollo's role in the last play of the trilogy, where in order to exonerate the crime of his protégé, Orestes, the god not only justifies matricide on the grounds that the male is more important than the female and the husband worth more than the wife, but goes so far as to propose the scandalous